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SUBJECT: ELECTIONS IN ECUADOR: THE ROLE OF THE MILITARY

REF: A. QUITO 2449

1B. 02 QUITO 3085

11. This cable is an update of Ref B, transmitted in September 2002, just prior to Ecuador's most recent national elections.

12. SUMMARY: Although soldiers, sailors and airmen (and police) cannot vote, the military nonetheless will play a prominent part in Ecuador's October 17 local elections. Printing the ballots, securing the voting stations, and delivering results to Quito are just a few of its logistical responsibilities; 35,000 military will take part in the electoral effort. Despite perceptions that the military supports the Gutierrez government and recent declines in public approval ratings, the armed forces remain an admired institution in Ecuador, and their visibility on election day both inspires public confidence and helps ensure a free and fair vote. END SUMMARY.

13. Ecuador's 1998 constitution bars active duty military (and police) from casting ballots. The armed forces' electoral role is robust, however, before, on, and after election day. As the only GoE institution with truly national reach, the military has assumed duties, from printing the ballots to transporting them for final tabulation, handled in most democracies by civilian organizations.

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Pre-vote Activities  
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14. In 2002, Carlos Aguinaga, then-president (and current member) of Ecuador's Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), provided a review of the military's electoral responsibilities that remains accurate today. Aguinaga noted the Ecuadorian public had deep faith in and admiration for the armed forces. They historically have provided logistical support for elections, and the TSE in 2002 signed an agreement with the Ministry of Defense that expanded even further the armed forces' role.

15. The Ecuadorian Army's Institute of Military Geography (IGM) just finished printing 36 million paper ballots needed for the upcoming October 17 contests (Ecuador's 8 million voters will elect governor-equivalents, mayors, provincial councils, city councils, and some rural councils, using separate ballots for each). When asked in 2002 if private firms had been able to bid on this seemingly lucrative contract, Aguinaga chuckled and recounted the mistake electoral authorities had made in 1996, when they contracted the task to the private sector. Protesters and/or vandals had breached the company's weak security and torched the just-printed ballots, causing major havoc in the pre-elections timetable. Aguinaga asserted the TSE would not repeat its earlier mistake, and was generally satisfied with IGM's performance.

16. In a recent meeting to discuss the TSE's voter education campaign in advance of the 2004 vote, Tribunal training expert Ana Patino praised the military's professionalism in a task outside its core mission. Under an accord signed earlier this year, the TSE trained the armed forces in electoral materials distribution/collection and precinct security. Patino claimed the TSE's education of the armed forces had proceeded far more smoothly than its training of civilian poll workers. Press accounts note the first of 13 Army-orchestrated election materials deliveries will occur on October 8, with all of Ecuador's 22 provinces receiving materials well in advance of the vote. The logistics then get tougher, as the military must transport the electoral kits to all of Ecuador's 35,000 voting stations; nonetheless, Patino was confident the military would mount a successful operation.

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Election Day Operations  
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17. The armed forces and Ecuadorian National Police will also provide security on election day, the military standing guard inside the voting places, the police patrolling the perimeters. Should a member of the armed forces security contingent suspect wrongdoing at the voting stations, he/she

is empowered to temporarily halt the voting and/or vote counting and request that the precinct's civilian coordinator investigate and rectify the situation. Once the polls have closed and the election workers have tallied the votes, the military will transport copies of the tally sheets to the TSE and the provincial electoral tribunals.

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COMMENT:  
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17. The armed forces play a vital role in Ecuadorian elections, as the only institution capable of handling logistical support and security nationwide. But they provide more than printing presses, trucks, and hired muscle. Respected analysts argue that the Army's involvement in elections, rather than provoking suspicions of fraud or intimidation among voters, in fact reassures the public of the process's probity. Unlike in neighboring countries, election day violence is rare in Ecuador, thanks in part to the military's visible presence.

CHACON